

HOW TO... Combine photos



You can join photos seamlessly in Photoshop Elements using just layers, the selection tools and the Eraser tool. Rod Lawton explains how to mix and match

Photoshop Elements is an excellent program, not just for enhancing your photos but also for combining them into seamless photo montages. If you want to superimpose shots of your friends against a tropical sunset or add the head of a chimpanzee to the body of your mother-in-law, all you need is some patience and skill and the right program.

Here we've used Photoshop Elements 5 (www.adobe.com/uk/products), a 30-day trial version of which is on the cover DVD. However, these techniques also work with previous versions of Elements. In our example, we're superimposing a sports car in a car park on to a more attractive woodland scene.

1 To combine two photos, you need to open them both in Elements. They will appear as thumbnail images in the Photo Bin running across the bottom of the screen. Select the image you want to use as the background by clicking its thumbnail. It should now appear in the main window. In our example, this is the photo of the tree. Click on the image you want to superimpose on it from the Photo Bin – in our example, this is the car – and drag the photo on to the main window. It's added as a new layer, which covers up the background image.

2 The Layers palette in the Palette Bin to the right of the screen shows that the image consists of two separate layers: the original Background layer and the

photo of a car that we dragged on to it. If you can't see the Layers palette, go to Windows, Layers to display it. Each layer is shown as a thumbnail image in the Layers palette. You need to click on a layer to select it before you can start editing it.

3 Next, choose the best selection tool for deleting the unwanted background. There are three Lasso tools in Elements, and they share the same button in the Toolbox on the left-hand side of the screen. The standard Lasso tool isn't much use here because it's impossible to follow a precise outline closely enough without mistakes and wobbles. The second option, the Magnetic Lasso, can follow outlines automatically, but it relies on clear tonal differences between the object and its background. Without that, it becomes difficult, darting off unexpectedly in different directions. The Polygonal Lasso tool enables you to build up selections with small straight-line sections. Each time you click the mouse button, another section is added. This is ideal for the outline of the car. Using this tool, we've traced around the rear wheel arch and part of the roof, then cut across the background and

back to the starting point to close the selection. Pressing the Delete key removes that section of the top layer, showing the background layer below.

4 We've gone round the rest of the car's outline, selecting small sections and deleting them.

This is better than attempting to select the whole outline in one go because mistakes are too easy to make and – if you've spent several minutes following the outline precisely – very frustrating to put right. There's still work to be done, though. Areas of background need to be deleted and the background itself looks a little low in relation to the position of the car.

5 Get rid of the unwanted background areas above the car and to the sides by using the Eraser tool, which can be found in the Toolbox on the left of the screen. When the Eraser tool is selected, the Options bar shows a series of brush options including a Size pop-up. Choosing a larger size enables you to delete larger areas more quickly. The next part – moving the background up a little – requires an extra step. Background layers (the base layer in a composite image such as this one) can't be moved. You need to double-click the layer's thumbnail in the Layers palette to promote it to a full layer. You'll be prompted to choose a name, but you can leave it set to Layer 0 to save time. The layer can be dragged up slightly using the Move tool in the Toolbox.

6 At the moment, there's a sharp join between the grass in the car layer and the autumn leaves in the image below. It's not possible to cut around each blade of grass, but there is another solution. By going back to the Eraser tool and choosing a large, soft brush size from the Options bar (Airbrush Soft Round 300), we can smoothly blend the two layers so that they appear to merge naturally.

DID YOU KNOW?

You can hide the Photo Bin and Palette Bin simply by clicking the arrows at the bottom left and bottom right of the screen

